Strikes and solidarity

Coalfield conflict in Britain 1889–1966

ROY CHURCH AND
QUENTIN OUTRAM

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1998
First paperback edition 2002

Typeface Plantin 9.5/12 pt.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Church, Roy A.
Strikes and solidarity: coalfield conflict in Britain 1889–1966 / Roy Church and Quentin Outram
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 55460 8 (hb)
1. Strikes and lockout – Coal mining – Great Britain – History.
2. Trade-unions – Coal miners – Great Britain – History.
3. Solidarity. I. Outram, Quentin. II. Title.
HD5365.M615C48 1998
331.892'822334'0941–dc21 97-12821 CIP

ISBN 0 521 55460 8 hardback
ISBN 0 521 89403 4 paperback

Contents

Figures and tables

Figures

Tables

1 Interpreting coalfield conflict: focus and formulations

Mining strikes and 'militant miners': contemporary perceptions and empirical expositions

Miners are not averse to striking on slight pretext. They like to 'play' at intervals, and then return to scrabble harder in the pits, whence they can direct their thoughts with some contempt to the people who have to pass all their hours on the surface. The public takes no notice of these small disputes. They are not even reported in the papers, except by some short paragraph stating that 2,000 men have stopped work because a non-unionist has been discovered, or a foreman is disliked or the appointment of a checkweighman is questioned. The man in the street wonders why such a storm in a teacup should upset so many people, and possibly deems the stoppage to be the work of an 'agitator' or an unnecessary exhibition of strength. (Askwith 1920/1974: 201)

Of all classes of labour, he [the coalminer] is the most grasping and the most combative, the sturdiest fighter in the industrial field, always asking for more. (Bulman 1920: 2)

The miner not only works in the pit, he lives in the pit village, and all his immediate interests are concentrated at one point. . . . The miners' intense solidarity and loyalty to their unions is undoubtedly the result of conditions under which they work and live. . . . Their isolation ministers to their self-sufficiency and loyalty one to another. (Cole 1923: 7)

The British coalminer's reputation for militancy, exemplified in the observations quoted above by Askwith, a leading and experienced industrial conciliator, Bulman, a colliery director, and Cole, a scholar and a champion of labour, endured into the 1990s, when the dramatic decline in the coal industry was accompanied by a spectacular fall in the number of working miners. The bitterness of industrial relations in the industry's history, the miners' periodic clashes not only with employers but with governments, and the industry's extraordinary record of strikes for many years before and after the Second World War has confirmed the portrayal of coalminers as among the most militant of all workers.

For more than a hundred years the relatively high strike propensity of coalminers has attracted comment from contemporary observers, social scientists, historians, and from miners themselves. Described as 'the traditional battle-

Table 1.1. *Average annual number of strikes per 100,000 employees in employment (broad industry groups, UK 1893–1966)*

Period	Mining and quarrying	Metals and engineering	Textiles	Clothing[a]	Building/ Construction	Transport and communications
1893–1900	18	12	9	4	16	3
1901–10	14	5	6	3	3	1
1911–20	13	12	8	6	12	5
1921–30	13	4	3	3	7	3
1931–38	27	5	6	3	5	2
1938–48	99	12	5	4	5	5
1949–58	171	7	2		7	5
1959–66	161	18	3		15	9

Notes:
Strikes and lock-outs as recorded by the Department of Employment and its predecessors. Data refer to strikes beginning in the years shown. The Census of Population data used for 1893–1920 did not clearly distinguish employees in employment from those unemployed (C. H. Lee 1979). Deficiencies and lack of comparabilities in the employment and strike data render small differences insignificant.
[a] Employment data refer to clothing and footwear for 1893-1920, clothing 1921–48, textiles and clothing 1949–58, and textiles and clothing and footwear 1959–66.
Sources: Strikes: Cronin (1979), appendix table B1. Employment: C. H. Lee (1979) for 1893–1920; Feinstein (1972) for 1920–48; Department of Employment and Productivity, *British Labour Statistics*, table 132 for 1949–66.

ground' by modern investigators (Durcan *et al.* 1983: 213), British coalfields were shown to be particularly susceptible to strikes as early as 1880, when Bevan described the number of strikes as 'out of all proportion to strikes in other trades' (1880: 39). The disproportionate number of strikes recorded in the industry is presented in table 1.1. By the 1950s no less than 70 per cent of all strikes in the UK were in mining and quarrying, a peak from which there was a subsequent decline both in relative and in absolute terms.

Yet serious deficiencies in our knowledge of the historical patterns of strike activity have obscured the nature of 'miners' militancy', and an understanding of its causes has so far eluded both commentators and scholars alike. Attempts to explain the industry's strike proneness have a long history. Some of these explanations will receive detailed scrutiny later in this book. At this point, however, we wish to emphasize how 'problematic' the industry's strike record has appeared to those in positions of power, and in particular to the organs of the state. A history of concern with the industry's industrial relations can be traced through a series of government enquiries from the late nineteenth century forward. These enquiries demonstrate not only the level of concern but also the

repeated failure of the state to find an adequate explanation of the problem which confronted it.

Although not explicitly concerned with the coal industry, the *Majority Report* of the Royal Commission on Labour of 1891–4 contained the essential elements of two perspectives which have both remained influential. The first was the contention that strikes occurred because of the absence or inadequacies of institutions for the discussion and negotiation of points of potential conflict (Royal Commission on Labour, *Majority Report*: 98); this is a view echoed in the analysis of industrial relations experts and scholars seventy years later. The second was that the separation of workers from their employers 'in their lives and pursuits' was a major factor in explaining overt industrial conflict, a view which reappeared in sociological models of mining communities in the 1950s.

Such models were more fully anticipated in the remarkable *Report on No. 7 Division (Wales and Monmouthshire)* of the 1917 Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest. This dealt both with the institutions of collective bargaining and with the geological, geographical, economic, demographic, social and ideological contexts of unrest among the miners of South Wales. In summarizing the 'reasons for the greater discontent manifested by the miners as compared with other classes of workers', it drew attention to four specific factors: first, an 'erroneous view of the value of colliery produce' (that is, coal prices and profits) and therefore the industry's ability to pay; second, the tendency towards monopoly in the industry, which it was suggested had 'aroused considerable alarm in the minds of the miners'; third, the very high density of colliery employment in some areas which induced 'an exaggerated view of their [the miners'] indispensability to the employers and to the nation' and also a high degree of commitment to their union; and fourth, the location of the industry away from large towns, which precluded 'intercourse with the inhabitants of such towns and participation in their public life and activities'. The fact that the industry was then considered to have been 'well organized' on both sides and that a conciliation board had long been in operation seemed, in contradiction to the earlier prescriptions of the 1891–4 Royal Commission, to offer no protection against strikes (Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest, *Report on No. 7 Division (Wales and Monmouthshire)*: 21).

Despite the short duration of the enquiry and the relative brevity of the *Report*, this has remained the most substantial official analysis of the 'especially pronounced' class antagonism found in the mining industry. The reports produced by the Sankey Commission in 1919 lacked analytical depth, while the 1926 report of the Samuel Commission, although certainly more substantial, was largely concerned with the economic state of the industry and treated industrial unrest as incidental to this concern. Unrest was examined primarily in terms of the grievances held by workers and employers and, implicitly and naively, the remedy recommended to end the strike proneness in the industry was that of removing 'well-founded' grievances (Royal Commission on the Coal Industry (1925), *Report*: 113). As in previous official reports this emphasis stemmed from

an excessive dependence on the evidence of witnesses whose roles in the industry as employers or trade union officials led them to concentrate on the success or failure of the institutions in which they participated, portraying grievances as the causes of strikes. Nowhere in these discussions is it acknowledged that a grievance was not a sufficient condition to precipitate strike action.

Well-founded or not, miners' grievances were not of course removed subsequent to the Samuel Commission's *Report*. Instead, in the General Strike and subsequent Coal Lock-out of 1926, British coalowners and the British state acted on what is probably the oldest theory of strike activity: that strikes will not occur in the absence of strong trade unions. The impoverishment and weakening of the coalminers' trade unions by the events of 1926 took mining industrial relations off the political agenda for many years. But, curiously, although they were defeated in the coalfields the political battle moved gradually in the miners' favour. By the end of the Second World War the propositions that the industrial relations of the industry were very poor, that this situation was the result of 'especially pronounced' class antagonisms in the industry, and that an appropriate and acceptable way to remove these was to nationalize the mines, were widely accepted (Supple 1987).

The failure of nationalization to achieve a 'transforming improvement' (Acton Society Trust 1953: 9) in the relations between workers and management had become obvious by the early 1950s. Although no national or official strike had taken place, local and unofficial strikes took place in extraordinarily large numbers, making mining by far and away the most strike-prone industry group on this measure (table 1.1). After undergoing a radical cure and finding it ineffective, the industry's managers gave every impression of having run out of ideas. By the mid-1950s there was a noticeable diagnostic and policy vacuum in the National Coal Board (NCB) (Baldwin 1955: 63, 83–4). In 1965 when the NCB was asked by another Royal Commission 'Is it possible to specify any principal reasons [for "the rather large number of unofficial stoppages" in the industry]?' it was reduced to saying:

> [I]t is not peculiar to this country that there are industrial disturbances in the coalmines. They happen all over the world. It is one of the features of the industry. Maybe it is in the nature of the industry. . . . I am afraid I could not give an answer to it. (Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Minutes of Evidence*, 4, Q720)

The research and investigations, statistical and otherwise, conducted by, or on behalf of, the state have produced analyses of 'miners' militancy' or miners' strikes which have failed to go beyond what one might call an impressionistic empiricism in which questions or perceptions derived from social theory are notably absent. Such approaches to strike activity have not been confined to official investigations, however. Knowles (1952) provided a valuable, exhaustive but atheoretic analysis of the published official statistics confining his investigations to the period between 1911 and 1947. The breadth of his coverage and the aggregative characteristic of the officially published data he used also limited the

scope of his research. The self-styled 'update' of Knowles's study carried out by Durcan *et al.* (1983) displayed many of the limitations of the earlier work. Cronin's study of *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (1979) was both aggregative and national in approach, building on the work of Shorter and Tilly on French strikes (1974) and emphasizing the importance of 'the political and organizational resources available to both sides in industrial conflict' (Cronin 1979: 37). He described his analysis of strike behaviour as dynamic, in search of a theory or concepts which might explain industrial conflict. His contribution in identifying a series of 'strike waves' in Britain since 1888 mapped the chronological dimension of strike activity for a period of almost one hundred years; yet partly because the scope of his enquiry was national and included all industries, his conclusion 'that strikes come in waves, in broad explosions of creative militancy' (1979: 194) was essentially descriptive rather than explanatory.

It is evident that while the subject of coalmining and coalminers has generated a vast literature, few explanations for the pronounced temporal and spatial variations in strike activity are well established. In part, our understanding of the history of mining strikes has been obscured because of the tendency of historians to reconstruct the history of industrial relations either from a trade union perspective or in episodic terms which emphasize not variations and patterns but events – the formation of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in 1889, the lock-out in 1893, the campaign for the eight-hour day, the first national miners' strike of 1912, and the great lock-outs of 1921 and 1926 (see J. E. Williams 1962a; Hobsbawm 1964; Briggs 1966). Although these events were important set-piece battles, the tendency to view the course of industrial relations history solely from this perspective runs the risk of failing to capture the significance of the numerous 'small disputes', often affecting no more than a single colliery, which accounted for most strikes in the industry, and to which Askwith drew attention in the passage with which we opened this chapter.

Theoretical orientations to mining strikes

The empirical approaches we have just discussed contrast with those adopted by Marxist writers, some of whom have cast miners in the vanguard of the class struggle. Despite their diversity, and although the theory is not always explicit, all Marxist writers place theory at the centre of their analyses of industrial conflict. We regard their writings as important not so much because of their specific content but more because their attempt to grasp the whole range of social reality as it unfolds through history serves to demonstrate the often limited and partial nature of the work carried out by non-Marxist historians and social scientists. Because of the diversity of approaches which can be found in the Marxist literature, it is helpful for the purpose of our own exposition to offer a synthesis of Marxist views based largely, though not entirely, on the work of Hyman (1972, 1975).

For Marxists, work relations under capitalism provide a permanent and

inevitable source of conflict, while the strike and lock-out are the most prominent methods by which employer and worker prosecute their mutually antagonistic interests. However, although industrial conflict is 'the central reality of industrial relations', overt conflict is rare and not commonplace (Hyman 1975: 190). As disputes are constantly occurring, more or less permanent machinery for the resolution of disputes by direct negotiation, conciliation or arbitration, often staffed by full-time specialist personnel, is established. In this way the expression of conflict becomes institutionalized. Moreover, the continual contact between the employer and employee sides of those institutions encourages the growth of shared understandings and orientations which, in the short term at least, facilitate the peaceful resolution of disputes. The hegemonic domination of capitalism, however, ensures that employee representatives tend to assimilate the world view of the employer rather than vice versa. In drawing closer to the employer's view of the world, employee representatives, especially full-time trade union officers, draw away from the outlook of the rank and file membership (Cronin 1989; Price 1989; Zeitlin 1989). This is one aspect of the 'inherent duality of trade unionism' and one reason why 'industrial peace' is a precarious state.

Established with difficulty and always provisional, industrial peace is subject to continual disruptions deriving from the inherent instability of capitalism, which continually undermines and subverts the technological, economic, social and political bases of the existing pattern of accommodation between employer and employee. Industrial relations are thus continually brought to points of crisis in which conflict becomes overt. The manner in which such crises are resolved and the terms of their resolution depend greatly on the leadership offered to workers by their industrial and political representatives. Where, despite the pressures inherent in their position, leaderships have retained a class consciousness or where they have acquired such a consciousness from political organizations, they are enabled to provide a militant leadership in sustained, overt conflict. Where leaderships have adopted the views and attitudes of their opponents, however, their predominant concern will be to bring overt conflict to an end as rapidly as possible, if necessary on terms detrimental to the working class.

This schema has found its most frequent application in the analysis of the very large national lock-outs and strikes of the British industry in the period after the First World War which culminated in the General Strike of 1926 and in the large national strikes of the early 1970s and mid-1980s. In these applications the emphasis is on crisis as the source of the dispute and on the tension between the rank and file and trade union and political leaders as a basis for understanding the course and the conduct of the strike. Thus Foster locates the General Strike in a general crisis of British imperialism precipitated by the First World War and exacerbated in the coal industry by the policies of a state dominated by financial interests (Foster 1976). In two wide-ranging studies Fine *et al.* (1985a, 1985b) also locate the General Strike in the contemporary political and economic crisis but provide little discussion of rank and file relationships with the trade union

leadership until they come to examine the industrial relations of the early nationalization period in the late 1940s and 1950s. Allen's work on the confrontations of the 1970s stresses the importance of changes in the miners' level of political consciousness, in turn attributed partly to the policies of governments, the policies of the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and to changing economic conditions. For Allen, however, 'The factor with the greatest significance at that time [the early 1970s] was undoubtedly the coterie of Communists and left wing Labour Party members who were active in the union at this time' (Allen 1981: 319).

Marxist-oriented studies of local industrial relations and conflict are rare. The study by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter of 'Ashton' colliery and its community in Yorkshire in the 1950s emphasized at different points the inherent conflict in capitalist industrial relations and the 'alienation between the interests of union officials and union membership' (Dennis *et al.* 1956: 32, 115). Rigg tested Allen's views on the importance of a class conscious leadership as a determinant of industrial militancy by means of an interview study of the union leadership of two collieries with widely contrasting levels of strike activity. The results tended to support Allen's view (Rigg 1987).

At a more abstract level the history of industrial relations in the British coal industry is, like any other aspect of history seen from this perspective, the outcome of the interplay of structures, organizations, consciousness and action (Giddens 1979; Hyman 1984: 180–8). 'Structures' are enduring constraints on human action. They may be 'natural' or 'social'. Relevant examples of natural structures include the geographical and geological disposition of coal measures and other natural resources. 'Social structures' are economic, social, political and legal institutions which have been created intentionally or unintentionally by human action but, once created, appear as constraints on human action which cannot be removed or relaxed immediately. The demographic and spatial characteristics of mining communities, the market for coal, the available technologies of coal extraction, and the institutions through which state power is shaped, transmitted and expressed, are examples of social structures. 'Organizations' form a subset of the set of social structures: they are defined in terms of the social relations between members of a group. Typically membership is clearly defined so that it is possible to refer unambiguously to people as 'members' or 'non-members', 'insiders' or 'outsiders', 'familiars' or 'strangers'. Typically, also, it is possible to describe the social relations of the members of the organization in terms of relations between superiors and inferiors, leaders and followers, officers and members. As colliery companies, employers' associations, trade unions and work teams are all examples of organizations it is clear that neither formal written rules nor special legal status is necessary for an organization to exist.

'Actions' are of two kinds. There are actions which confirm the reality and rigidity of the constraints offered by existing natural or social structures: the strike for higher wages which fails and confirms the reality of the constraints

placed on wage settlements by a free market for coal, or the strike, such as the 1984–5 British miners' strike, which confirms the reality of state power. But there are also actions which change structures: the strike that wins union recognition and thus changes the structure of social relations at the workplace or the political campaign which succeeds in replacing private by state ownership of the industry. 'Consciousness' is the subjective interpretation and valuation of structures, organizations and actions. Consciousness may be more or less coherent and more or less articulate. The ideology of the 'independent collier' with its stress on individualism and job control (Campbell and Reid 1978) is one example; the ideas, attitudes and valuations summed up in the word 'paternalism' as documented in the British mining context, for example, by Waller (1983) is another as is, of course, a Marxist-Leninist class consciousness as studied in our context by Macintyre (1980b).

None of these four elements (structures, organizations, consciousness and action) can be studied sensibly in isolation from the other three. Structures influence actions but this influence is mediated by organization and consciousness. Actions change structures, organizations and consciousness. These processes take place in time and as such cannot be understood without a historical dimension. Today's actions are constrained by structures and organizations put in place by yesterday's actions and have meaning for their participants in terms of a consciousness derived from past experiences, a point underlined by Kenneth Morgan's contemporary commentary on the strike of 1984–5, 'A time for miners to forget history' (1985). These points are all fairly straightforward and uncontentious, yet it is remarkable how much of the previous research relevant to this study has failed to go beyond an analysis of structures or a description of the development of an organization or a celebration of the advanced class consciousness of the mining proletariat. How far the interactions between the various aspects of social reality can be identified and elucidated in the history of British coalmining between 1889 and 1966 is the central problem addressed in this study. The next section explains the methodology we have employed in our attempts to do so and maps out the investigations which follow.

Methods, sources and schema

Theorists claim meaning for their work, though typically it is lacking in historical content. Too often the writings of labour historians and of other empiricists possess content but employ little theory (if at all) and offer interpretation within limits defined by either the organizations or by the specific events which concern the authors. Too few studies of the social history of miners have focused on historical processes. Here we have attempted to combine theory and concepts from the social sciences with empirical historical data. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, one of our principal criticisms of previous work in this field is that, with few exceptions, each contribution has offered only a partial account of its subject. Our work attempts to rectify the one-sidedness of current

understandings. Our choices of theories and concepts are based on our judgements of their relevance to the questions we seek to answer and the fruitfulness of their application.

This has resulted in the assembly of quantitative data which is new, qualitative evidence from primary sources, and also the use of secondary sources, including traditional historical narratives. By using an existing literature on the social and economic history of coalmining to supplement our own researches, and with the assistance of concepts and theory from the social sciences, we have sought to inject more meaning into traditional accounts of institutions and events in the industry and to generalize. While the study is national in scope it is not our intention to provide either a narrative history of all colliery strikes between 1889 and 1966 or even of the major conflicts which punctuated the history of the industry. None the less, the descriptions of strike activity contained in traditional histories are susceptible to later analytical interpretations which their authors would not have contemplated. Partly from these sources, and by constructing some of our own case histories, we have juxtaposed the aggregative with the case study and we have analysed both quantitative data on large numbers of strikes and large samples of collieries with qualitative data pertaining to single strikes, collieries, companies and localities. We have found this diversity of approach to be an effective way of compensating for the deficiencies of each approach on its own.

One of the most important differences between our research and that of other researchers is that our focus is on local rather than national, regional, district or county strikes. These other manifestations of conflict find a place in our study, but only in contexts where they can illuminate the strike activity and also the nature of miners' solidarity. The justification for this focus is that the frequency and prevalence of strikes limited to a single locality or colliery are so numerous compared with other kinds of strikes that the local strike may be regarded as 'ordinary'. The questions we explore concern spatial, chronological and inter-colliery differences; the levels and differential patterns of strike activity between collieries and between localities; strike persistence over time; factors which explain both high and low strike proneness; and strike participation and the issue of 'miners' militancy'. In each case the statistical basis is national, but a comprehensive coverage using primary and printed sources was quite beyond imaginable resources and reasonable time required for such a study. Hence the strategy of combining intermediate levels of analysis of a limited population of localities and collieries with a smaller number of case studies. While our study cannot claim to be comprehensive in all respects, we would argue that the methodology we have used to make a systematic selection of our sources justifies the claims we make for the validity of our conclusions.

The period covered in this study begins in 1889. That marked the formation of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) and the beginning of the collection of annual strike data by the Labour Department of the Board of Trade. The bulk of our research has focused on the period up to the Second